

CD-ROM : - THE 21ST CENTURY BRONZE?

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Abstract

Desktop CD-ROM burners capable of making individual discs has attracted the attention of visual artists and created the opportunity for computer artists to make their work more widely available.

During the development of the exhibition, 'Burning the Interface <Artists CD-ROM>' for the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, in March 1996, some 130 artists sent-in work for consideration.

The paper previews the range of strategies employed by the artists in designing the screen interface and some of the issues raised by the artworks concerning the interactive and the immersive states of engagement are considered.

During 1993, various manufacturers marketed desktop CD-ROM burners capable of making an individual compact disc-read only memory, a desktop technology initially intended for the archiving of company accounts and records. Besides attracting commerce however, the technology has also attracted the attention of artists.

This medium of storage could be said to mirror the impact of the arrival of bronze casting on the development of the art object - plasticity and permanence.

By directly working with clay and bronze, such as those in 5th Greece, or in a developing technology such as digital data and CD-ROM, the artist will reveal more quickly than the technical specialist the full range of a new mediums potential together with the distortions that the technology can bring within the broader spectrum of communication issues.

The ephemeral and fugitive nature of much computer-based work has restricted its exhibition potential to one-off installations or playout through video/film recording, and so on. The option to acquire work and thus experience it over a period of time has been restricted. More recently, parking art on a Web site has become a most intriguing option, particularly as lack of bandwidth has tested the ingenuity and patience of artist and audience alike and introduced fresh nuances to the term ephemeral, the subject of much intelligent research by artists alone.

In this context, contemporary artists are using the computer/CD-ROM medium for the storage of work needing fre-

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quent acquisition to large files. The development of this medium has addressed several of the earlier 'problem areas':

List on data screen of following points:

A:

- where previously there was a whole host of 'computing systems' of infinite combinations of hardware and software, the Compact Disc as a publishing/distribution medium has encouraged the convergence of systems for making, and replicating, the artwork;

B:

- the archival specifications of CD-ROM can more or less guarantee that a completed work as "art-on-disc":

- cannot be erased, or tampered with and altered;

- cannot be duplicated, with the correct safeguards in place, thus preventing the unauthorised copying of artists work and its illicit commercial exploitation;

- has relatively stable chemistry and therefore specifications which appeal to the long-term needs of archives. This therefore offers good prospects for financial return to artists through:

-purchase by collections both private and public, of limited editions of a work;

-the editioning of multiple runs for wider distribution by niche publishers;

-the licensing of titles to networks via servers or linked CD-ROM players.

Such arrangements are capable of giving assurance to the artist concerning the time and material resources invested and offer better prospects for financial compensation than through rentals on films and videotapes, or fees for installation.

Other problem areas now being addressed include:

C:

- the cost of transferring computer files from "the studio", (the workstation with hard disc/server) to "the gallery", (the Compact Disc), has been lowered, enabling a relatively low cost of 'casting' - AU\$150 per copy commercially down to AU\$30 material costs if a 'burner' can be accessed;

D:

- alongside the marketing of tools for the consumption of CD-ROM, the Industry has developed tools for production, designed for specialist users rather than programmers, thus offering artists independence at the production stage from profit orientated facility houses.

The business of developing a studio practice is in its early days, pioneers in the area can begin to remove the structures and procedures erected by computer specialists. For instance the magpie approach to amassing material with which to work, having converted it into digital form, is to catalogue the stuff onto a CD-ROM and use the disc(s) as an archive, accessing onto the working disc as and when the need arises; no backups, no maintenance - in other words, pretty cheap storage.

In August 1994 I commenced researching an exhibition on behalf of the Australian Film Commission and the Museum of Contemporary Art in Sydney, the purpose of the show to survey at an international level the approaches artists are taking to utilising the CD-ROM medium. We called for work which explored all aspects but at this stage in time prior to a definition of what the exhibition will be, we made a short list of work which seemed ontological rather than just exploring the potential of the new medium. For the second section of this paper and in the short time available I will provisionally examine aspects of the issues around Interface raised by some of these artists.

The letter 'i' features strongly in a description of the issues of interface - a case of "the 'i's have it"! Two more are brought immediately to mind: interactive and immersive. And by issues I mean what hack art teachers call ideas. And hack producers call innovation - there's two more... Issues like - incentive, or maybe when viewed as a participant, motivation - 'Why do I want to move through this work that requires my attention, and an active response...?'

John Colette, a Sydney-based artist, came up with a solution to this by providing three starting points based on the same data on his disc '30 Words for the City'.

- The Card Player randomly plays a loop of the entire work.

- The Stand Alone Player plays in a loop until Quit.

- The Interactive Book acts as 'a book format of the piece.'

- his description.

Completed at the end of last year, Colette's work took some mature approaches to the intrinsic attractiveness of small, brightly coloured, moving images offering options of, as the book metaphor suggests, random access and exit from any part to any other. The metaphor is appropriate in describing the relationship that his piece sets-up with the reader for, as auteur, he provides sounds and pictures captured from the two cities of Sydney and Tokyo, manipulated, combined, collaged and edited with startling image clarity, as a backdrop for haiku-like poetic word presentations which record his feelings about moving and existing in these environments. The interacting subject by definition, is in the same kind of close proximity as would be the reader of a book, the artform which through the novel, has come to define the intimacy of the one to one communication process, so consummately demonstrated in this work.

The clues provided in this 'book' as to 'content' are not found through a contents or index page but simply through combining the two states of interaction and immersion sequentially - you select from one of the button images, you watch, you decide what to watch next - the metaphor of the physical book is thus tenuous, particularly as a real book lacks the hyperlinking feature so particular to interactive mediums capable of moving directly from the content/index description to the source text, sound and images.

Similar states of interaction and immersion I suggest occur in works such as 'ScruTiny in the Great Round' by Jim Gasperini, 'Die Veteranen'* from the group of Leipzig artists,

and Peter de Lorenzo's 'Reflections, Abstractions and Memory Structures' which goes to the 'extreme' of enabling interaction to simply start-stop-start the entirely linear image progression.

'Digital Rhizome' by Brad Miller, (shown at ISEA94), was the first interactive computer piece I encountered 18 months ago and the notes I made then I feel apply as a general strategy for many other works which move forwards using the mouse click on Buttons, labelled for some works such as Miller's and including for instance, 'Body, Space, Memory'* by Chemelewski et al. Or not labelled, such as Ralph Wayment and Phil George in 'Mnemonic Notations', Mark Lycette in 'Autograph'. The anti-button attitude struck by the collaborators of the British work 'Anti-Rom', likewise entertainingly explore a thousand-and-one-things-to-do with a Mouse except click-it, and where the physical dexterity of mouse-moves becomes an issue.

In tracing points at which meaning are established by this process I'll refer to Digital Rhizome, (in which sections from Deleuze and Guattari's, A Thousand Plateaus, are quoted in genuflection to the theoretical backdrop for the piece). The title screen presents eight options including Exit - no clue is given as to the consequence of making one choice or another - a first level of meaning is thus quickly established which proposes that whilst sequence will have significance, a specified order will not, hence the narrative that I will encounter will be unique to my personal interaction with the piece.

A collage of images are deployed across the area of the screen and superimpose on a textured backdrop. As selected buttons lead on to successive screens a pattern begins to emerge about the organisation of the screen space. The interactive contribution is quickly learnt to influence progress palpably, but is recognised as not being "control". A second level of meaning is thereby soon attained.

There commences now a process which attempts to delineate the furthest extent of each sector of the work, clicking outwards in a conceptual circle, attempting to plot 'landmark' images along the way, before returning through the maze to the start point, to then set-out to test the path again before beginning again from another point.

With so little to go on ("..not a beginning or an end; it is always in the middle .."), the "mazing" process itself offers the third level of meaning as the motivational drive changes into a pleasurable era of reflexivity. Without knowledge of the consequences of taking options, (rather than making choices), the form of the exploration is accepted as being purely aleatoric - chance not choice. This shades into the ludic as soon as some confidence is gained in recognising patterns of image-routes. But visual memory of images, text clusters, button slogans etc, are severely stretched in an effort to map the topography - the game plan is easily subverted. As mazing continues "Control" is not wrested but at best shared.

The perambulation is as through a series of arcades or galleries, exposing the author's and the interactor's predilections and prejudices in the tradition of reflective contemplation. Walter Benjamin's flaneur is evoked directly in this sense in another Cd-Rom work, 'Passagen', by Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone.

A fourth level of meaning is now available to securely invoke the familiar defuser of subversive strategies - interpretation. In the case of 'Digital Rhizome', on what basis were these images selected? Do they in themselves acknowledge the received (from TV, from print) image as problematic? Are they from a folio of experiments, with cameras outputted to the computer and then 'developed' to challenge received assumptions? It seems from this initial encounter that the element in the piece, the base unit, is the moving image which, as we all know, appeals to our innate hunter's eye. Most of the movies are referencing technology and the technology of war in particular - the hunter's eye is appropriately served. The mind reels under the weight of mass disseminated paranoia - the brutality of the Age of Print; the callousness of the computer-imaged Gulf War. Does the ability to participate through this interactive piece in 'choosing' to steer again the route which will run again the image of Iraqi squaddies running from their vehicles as a missile homes-in, make the event anymore meaningful in the wider context? Or does it simply reflect, through the computer technology in front of which we sit, the ability to image what previously could only be imagined? Through juxtaposition with images that could only be created by the artist on a computer, is there a dialectic space created a priori to enable us to see a way through such terror? The keynote speakers here at ISEA95 seem to have a real obsession with all images being intractable - whether it is the Kroker's images of The Redundant Body, or Gert Lovink's images of Despairing Youth in War-Torn Europe - could it be that meaning is assumed to be monolithic according to the proclivities of the perceivers? I would suggest that the process which I outline above where there is an option of interacting with 'one-dimensional' images grabbed from mediaspace, whilst it confronts us with what appears to be the intractable image, the process enables us to comprehend the narrative process to which we are subjected by external Agencies, propagated by the Media. We know that constant repetition can render meaningless but to be in a position to determine for oneself the number of repetitions returns the formation of meaning to the perceiver. I would suggest the work of Linda Dement in for instance 'Cyberflesh Girlmonster'* enables the intractable images and social realities that she raises to be successfully interrogated through a process of interaction.

Celebration of the intimacy of the process is enacted in the classic tome 'Les Confessions'* of Jean-Louis Boissier, (after Rousseau), where the smallest of physical movements are mirrored by a response from the Mouse. This gentle and sensuous correspondence, requiring the responding gesture, has almost become the hallmark for the 'artintact'* series from the artists

in residence at ZKM. Much of this work has re-authored material from installations and other projects - the ephemeral and ambitious in distributable versions - but the development of the individual artworks, at an idea and technical level but more particularly at a public interface level enables the process to be examined over a period of time and so become refined. 'artintact' indicates that CD-ROM is at the stage of development where Cinema was 80 years ago, when the great theatre entertainers were putting their acts on celluloid! (Chaplin, Keaton, the Marx Bros et al perfected their scripts and performances in the variety theatres of the day, sometimes involving years of polishing before adapting and recording them for Cinema).

Conclusion

Whilst being regarded by sections of the Industry as an intermediate technology awaiting the arrival of the 'superhighway' networks, the CD media's material immutability will remain a major advantage as a storage device. Through connection to whatever distribution system technology provides, (as time goes by), like the Greek bronze, the disc is a stable repository of cultural evidence capable of becoming knowledge.

The final image is that of the bronze discus thrower which began the presentation - but a wider framing reveals the other components from a magazine page.

Postscript

To anticipate the social impact on the present of electronically compressing time and space is a problem, on the future daunting: could Guttenberg have anticipated the impact of formalising the written word using wooden blocks? Could Daguerre or Fox Talbot have predicted the social effect of organising silver salts onto metal and paper?

To extend the time frame further - what would the Greek artist responsible for the clay model of the Discobulus have felt about his work being reproduced in bronze, let alone some 2,400 years after his death, as a flat image, in colour, in a magazine circulated to thousands of people, so that one of them could then fax to me a copy of the image, to be photographed onto a slide, to be projected onto a screen, in front of us here. Whilst examining how we deal with these complex issues now I sometimes wonder, just for a moment, how these artworks currently being made into a permanent artefact in CD-ROM form will be mediated to an audience in the 44th Century, 2,400 years from now?

* indicates work exhibited as part of ISEA95

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